

# 110 Years of South African Cinema (Part 2)

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*The following article is the concluding half (part 1 published in Kinema Spring 2006) of a three-section historical overview of South African cinema from early beginnings as newsreels during the Anglo-Boer War to the recent international acclaim for features such as Tsotsi. Some of the veterans of South African cinema are also acknowledged. The last section of this article is dedicated to South African documentary filmmaking.*

## (2) PROFILES OF VETERAN DIRECTORS

**ALTHOUGH** 1994 saw the birth of democracy in South Africa our film industry is much older; in fact, our great documentary film tradition dates back to 1896 and the Anglo-Boer War.<sup>(1)</sup> While celebrating the past ten years of democracy, we shouldn't forget those filmmakers who created films against all the odds. Jans Rautenbach (*Jannie Totsiens*), Ross Devenish (*Marigolds in August*) and the younger generation of the 1980s challenged moral and political censorship, a severe lack of audience development and inadequate film distribution to shape progressive texts, which became the foundation of a new, critical South African cinema during the 1990s.

The aim of this second part of my article is to provide brief profiles on these veterans, who were critical of life in South Africa under apartheid. These directors were Lionel Ngakane, Ross Devenish, Jans Rautenbach, Katinka Heyns and Manie van Rensburg. Van Rensburg's work has already been explored in depth in previous editions of *Kinema*.

### Ngakane, Lionel (1920 - 2003)

Filmmaker Lionel Ngakane was born on 17 July 1920 and educated at Fort Hare University College in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, as well as at the University of the Witwatersrand. From 1948 to 1950 he worked on *Zonk* and *Drum* magazines. He entered the film industry in 1950 as director Zoltán Korda's assistant on *Cry, the Beloved Country*. He also played the part of Absalom in the film.

Soon after he left South Africa for London, where he remained until his return in 1994. Between 1951 and 1980 he acted in several films, as well as in theatre and television productions. He also participated in several radio dramas. He appeared, for example, in dramas such as *Mark the Hawk* (1957), *Two Gentlemen Sharing* (1969) and *The Squeeze* (1977).

Ngakane received international acclaim for his short film, *Jemima and Johnny* (1966), which was inspired by riots in Notting Hill. It portrays the political tensions of the time in the story of a friendship between a white boy and black girl. It was awarded at the Venice film festival.

During his exile from South Africa, Ngakane travelled and lived in many African countries, during which time he made documentary films in Nigeria, Liberia and the Ivory Coast. In 1977 he took over as director of Golden Baobab Entertainment in Senegal, heading its film department. Ngakane later also directed documentaries about apartheid and African development. He was elected honorary president and regional secretary for Southern Africa of the Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI), of which he was one of the founding members. He was a consultant on *A Dry White Season* (1989). He was also the member of several international juries for recognised film festivals like Carthage in Tunisia, Leipzig, Edinburgh and Amsterdam.

Back in South Africa during the 1990s he advised on the development of township cinemas and was part of the working group of the Film Development Strategy by the department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. The objective of the group was to formulate policy for a post-apartheid film industry. In 1997 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Natal. He also served on the M-Net All African Awards film competition panels, as well as in an advisory capacity for the M-Net New Direction series.

He finally served on the inaugural Council of the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) between 1999 and 2003. The NFVF established a Dr Lionel Ngakane Scholarship Fund with an annual pledge of one million rands. Since 2003 the Cape Town World Cinema Festival has awarded the Lionel Ngakane Award for the most promising filmmaker. Ngakane died on 26 November 2003.

### **Devenish, Ross (1939-)**

Ross Devenish, one of the most internationally acclaimed South African directors, was born in Polokwane (Pietersburg) in 1939. During his childhood years in Brits, a town outside Pretoria, he dreamt about becoming an engine driver. His father served in the South African Air force during the Second World War. When his dad return from the front he brought with him a roll of 16mm film, which had been taken from the camera filming engagements over enemy territory. Devenish became fascinated with these film rolls and he decided to make films.

At 19 he went to study film in London at the London School of Film Technique. He made several documentaries during the 1960s in war zones such as the civil war in Yemen, Borneo, Malaysia, the Congo and Vietnam. He worked for Associated Rediffusion, which was the precursor of Thames Television when he filmed conflict in the Congo during the sixties. His last war experiences were in Vietnam just before and during the Tet Offensive. He worked at that stage for ITV - Thames television. The Vietnamese war had a huge impact on Devenish and he realised that the very same thing could happen in apartheid South Africa.

In the 1970s Devenish and playwright Athol Fugard created three highly acclaimed films: *Boesman and Lena* (1973), *The Guest* (1977) and *Marigolds in August* (1979). *Boesman and Lena*, based on Fugard's play, was the first local feature to portray the poverty and enforced removals of South Africans classified as "black" under apartheid. *The Guest* focuses on a small period in the life of Afrikaner intellectual, poet, writer and opium addict, Eugene Marais, going "cold-turkey" on a farm, called Steenkampskraal. Athol Fugard plays Marais as he staggers inevitably towards suicide. Devenish cuts incisively through the mythical stereotype of Marais, who believed that the existence of life is founded on pain and sorrow. This pain is the subject of a graceful, austere and controlled film, which handles its themes almost with musical skill. It is passed on and explored with almost fugue-like pattern, from person to person, from voice to voice, until Marais' point seems irrefutable. Lastly, *Marigolds in August* portrays the tension between a poor, black man and an unemployed black man, who is struggling to support a family in a township near Port Elizabeth. The township is a place where malnutrition is rife. It is from this place that the one man walks every morning to work in the white beach resort. His security, however, is threatened by the presence of Melton, who is looking for work. The third of Devenish's collaborations with Athol Fugard, the film was one of the few local features in the 1970s which examined the conditions of blacks in South Africa. It became an international award winner at various film festivals, including Berlin.

Finding it impossible to work in the South African apartheid film industry, he left for the United Kingdom in the 1980s, where he directed several acclaimed television dramas such as an eight-part series of *Bleak House* and features. He returned to South Africa in 2002 and is developing new film projects presently, including an adaptation of Zakes Mda's novel *Ways of Dying*.

### **Rautenbach, Jans (1936 - )**

Many film historians regard Jans Rautenbach as the pioneer of modern, bold and South African filmmaking during the 1960s and 1970s. Together with producer Emil Nofal he made groundbreaking films during a time when South African cinema hardly reflected the socio-political realities of the country.

Born in 1936 in Boksburg Rautenbach grew up in a very poor household. His father worked in the mines. He started his school years at a primary school in Boksburg. After studying theology at the University of Stellenbosch for three years Rautenbach decided this wasn't his profession and he moved to Bloemfontein. While working as a clerk in a government department he studied criminology at the University of the Orange Free State. In January 1960 he accepted a position as criminologist in the Central Jail in Pretoria. But on 12 February 1963 he gave twenty-four hour notice to leave and work in the film industry.

He started his film career as a production manager for Jamie Uys Films, but joined Emil Nofal later in 1963 to start a new company, Emil Nofal Films. Nofal and Rautenbach combined their unique talents on *Wild Season* (1967), an acclaimed drama about the conflict between a father and his son, set against the backdrop

of a fishing community along the West Coast of Southern Africa.

The next three projects, which Rautenbach directed, became milestones in South African cinema. In 1968 in his debut as director, Rautenbach examines various aspects of the urban (white) Afrikaner through the events surrounding the election of a new director for the Adriaan Delpont Foundation in an acclaimed melodrama, *Die Kandidaat* (*The Candidate*). As the backgrounds of the potential candidates have been thoroughly checked the appointment should be a mere formality. Instead the meeting degenerates into a bitter dispute over which one of the council members satisfies the requirements of genuine Afrikanerdom. *Die Kandidaat* explores the Afrikaner psyche critically and exposes the hypocrisy of those designated as "super" Afrikaners. Drawing heavily on Carl Jung and his own background in psychology, Rautenbach presents the viewer with various archetypes and in the process dissects the psyche of white Afrikanerdom.

After the critical acclaim for *Die Kandidaat*, Rautenbach directed *Katrina* (1969), one of the most innovative films to come out of the apartheid years of the sixties. Based on a powerful story by Basil Warner, *Try for White* is, for its time, a shocking exposé of the horrors of apartheid and the racial classification system. The film focuses on a "coloured" woman, Katrina, who "tries for white." She renounces her mother and father to make possible a better life for herself and her son in apartheid South Africa. Her son is unaware of his roots and is dating a white girl. A white Anglican priest falls in love with Katrina and their lives are shattered when the secrets are revealed. Rautenbach received death threats from the far right in South Africa and had to battle the censors in South Africa to make this film.

In his next feature, *Jannie Totsiens* (1970), Rautenbach uses a mental institution as an allegory of South African society under apartheid. This was South Africa's first avant garde film, which caused a sensation, especially among the intellectuals of the time. Again by using Jungian archetypes Rautenbach examines the Afrikaner psyche. Although South African audiences were not ready for this stimulating psychological drama, which has challenged Afrikanerdom's conservative culture, it remains even by today's standards a fascinating portrait of a nation's confused psyche and has anticipated developments in South African politics during the 1980s.

His next film, *Pappalap* (1971), deals with class divisions within Afrikanerdom, and especially with the marginalised section of white Afrikaners, the very poor, who in the context of the film live as *bywoners*.<sup>(2)</sup> Class divisions within Afrikanerdom were also explored in *Eendag op 'n Reendag* (1975).

His second last feature, *Broer Matie* (1983), returned to the political discourse of *Katrina* and *Die Kandidaat*. *Broer Matie* is a gripping melodrama dealing with the unsettling political background of 1961 in South Africa. With incidents such as the Sharpeville massacre still fresh in everyone's minds, the main character causes furore in a rural community when his last will and testament determines that a church minister of colour should conduct the sermon at his burial. As in the case of *Die Kandidaat* Rautenbach exposes the hypocrisy of white Afrikaners and the importance for this part of the South African community to accept and face a multicultural society in which everyone should be treated as equal. The film was made a decade before the historical elections in 1994, which led to a government of national unity in South Africa.

Rautenbach never wanted to work for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and thus stopped making features after 1984. He became instrumental in the establishment of the Small Karoo National Arts Festival (KKNK) in 1994, which has developed into one of the largest national arts festivals in South Africa. He is currently living on a farm, *Oulap*, in the Small Karoo of South Africa.

### **Heyns, Katinka (1947 - )**

When one studies the first 100 years of South African cinema it is clear that the industry was extremely male-dominated in terms of directors. Only a few female directors managed to make features (Truida Pohl, Katinka Heyns, Elaine Proctor, Helena Noguiera) and only since the 1990s were black female directors able to break into the industry (Palesa Nkosi, Xoliswa Sithole, Meganthrie Pillay, Zulfah Otto-Sallies and others).

Katinka Heyns has emerged as one of the outstanding multi-award winning film actresses and directors in South African cinema. Born in 1947, Heyns graduated at the University of Pretoria with a BA degree in Drama (*cum laude*). Her involvement in the film industry started in 1969 in Jans Rautenbach's *Katrina*, in which she played a white girl, who unknowingly falls in love with a so-called coloured boy. She then played demanding character roles in other Rautenbach features including *Jannie Totsiens* (1970), *Pappa*

*Lap* (1971) and *Eendag op 'n Reëndag* (1975), for which she won a Rapport Oscar for Best Actress. She became a well-known television actress in the comedy series *Willem* by director Manie van Rensburg. She also appeared in many theatrical productions staged by the former Theatre Arts Councils in the Transvaal and Cape Provinces.

In 1974 Heyns founded her own production company, *Sonneblom Films*. After the introduction of television in South Africa, Heyns also directed quality documentary programmes about famous literary figures such as D. J. Opperman and N. P. Van Wyk Louw, for which she won the award for Best Director by the *Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging* (Afrikaans Language and Culture Society, ATKV). Since the 1980s, television dramas and series have followed: *Piet-My-Vrou* (1981), *Tekwan* (1984), *Die Avonture van Joachim Verwey* (1981), *Die Dood van Elmien Adler* (1983), *Simon en Sandra* (1989) and recently, for M-Net, *Amalia* (2005). She has also made numerous educational and children television programmes. She has twice been the recipient of the prestigious Medal of Honour from the South African Academy of Arts and Science, and has also received the Legendary Award for the Woman in Film and Television International Crystal awards.

Heyns has been acclaimed in South Africa and abroad for three outstanding award-winning features that deal in a very sensitive way with the female psyche: *Fiela se Kind* (1987), *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* (1991) and *Paljas* (1997). *Fiela se Kind* tells the story of the fortunes of Benjamin, a white boy brought up by Fiela Komoetie, a "coloured" woman of the Lange Kloof in the Cape. The boy, spotted by a census official, is brought before a magistrate's court and claimed by a white woman as the child she had lost some nine years earlier. The heartbroken Fiela tries to retrieve the boy now named Lukas, but is blocked by an implacable colonial legal system with strong racist overtones. Lukas is also ill-treated by his new father. The film is a powerful portrayal of social injustice in colonial South Africa. The film won numerous AA Life/M-Net Vita Awards in 1988, including Best South African film and Best director (Katinka Heyns).

*Die Storie van Klara Viljee* has been praised as an important feminist statement in South African cinema. Set in the late 1950s in a small southern Cape village, this film deals with the self-imposed exile of a woman due to mysterious events. Robbed by the ocean of her father, as well as her boyfriend, the principal character, Klara, decides to deny the sea's presence by building her house on the landward side of a dune. When she learns all might not have been as it appeared, she starts to remove the dune, using only a donkey and a plough. It seems to be an impossible task, but serves as a strong metaphor for Klara's embracing of life after the denial of reality.

*Paljas* follows the deterioration of an Afrikaner family isolated and shunned in the small community of Toorwater during the 1960s. Nothing seems to happen. Then a circus train loses its way and comes to rest in Toorwater, and a mysterious clown brings fresh magic to the stagnating family, but he also poses a threat to the rest of the community. *Paljas* won the Medal of Honour from the South African Academy for Science and Arts, after being accepted as the first official entry from South Africa for an Oscar in the category Best Foreign Film.

An important professional relationship in Heyns's success is that with her husband, Chris Barnard, who wrote most of the screenplays for her films, dramas and television series.

### **Van Rensburg, Manie (1945-1993)**

Hermanus Philippus (Manie) Janse van Rensburg was born on 24 October 1945 in Krugersdorp, a town in the former Transvaal province. He was part of a staunch, conservative Afrikaner family. Despite the restrictions imposed on him by this conservative upbringing, he tried to realise a dream to make motion pictures. The first step to this end was made when he bought his first movie camera at the age of 14 with his earnings as a church organist. Van Rensburg came from a strong musical background, which would later help him in creating lyrical images for the big screen.

Unable to further his education at an international film school due to financial and familial restrictions, he decided to go to the University of Potchefstroom where he obtained a degree majoring in English and Psychology. Following this academic period, Van Rensburg began an intense practical learning period in the artistic drought of South African film making of the 1960s. He tried to work for everybody who was somebody in motion picture production. In order to learn the trade thoroughly, he worked through all levels of film, from camera to editing to script-writing. He started as a darkroom assistant for a stills photographer in

1965. During 1966 he became an assistant cameraman. Van Rensburg continued his career as the cameraman on *Hoor My Lied* (*Hear My Song*, 1967), a soppy musical made with a large budget in the Western Cape Province and in the USA. The film was an enormous success with white Afrikaans-speaking audiences and prompted the series of Afrikaans soap operas that appeared between 1967 and 1980.

Van Rensburg formed his own independent film company, Visio Films, in 1969. He was twenty-two years old. He directed and financed a film about loneliness in an urban environment, *Freddie's in Love*. He started with R140 in the bank and a large section of the film was made in black-and-white, because he couldn't afford colour film stock. He didn't have any money for lights, so his production assistant who worked as a stage manager at Johannesburg's Civic Theatre would borrow what the film team needed. The film was eventually a character study of loneliness in cold, bleak Hillbrow. It was unique in that it didn't conform to any of the social norms prevalent in South African filmmaking at the time - it was a film with avant-garde tendencies. Local audiences rejected it outright and stayed at home.

A couple of years elapsed before he made a competent thriller, *Die Bankrower* (*The Bank Robber*, 1972). It received positive notices from the critics. After this feature, Kavalier Films (which was responsible for much of the escapism fare in Afrikaans film of the time), offered Van Rensburg a two-film contract. They would provide the finance for him to make one film of his own choice (provided it had commercial possibilities) on condition he made a feature of a radio serial for them. The film he made for Kavalier, *Geluksdal*, is his worst film and not at all different from the Afrikaans film junk of the period. The film was a financial success, but Van Rensburg admitted that this was not his finest hour.

The other film, one of his own choice, *Die Square*, was initially banned by the South African censors. Van Rensburg considered the film to be a fairy tale, which revolved around a political party break-away. A politician's wife leaves him, which spoils his image, and in order to save face, he has to get her back, which means he has to conform to her standards and become less conservative. The film became a satire on Afrikaner hegemony in the political and moral life of the country. Years later, with *Taxi to Soweto*, a similar plot was used by Van Rensburg to address Afrikaner fears regarding black South Africans.

Van Rensburg was initially not part of the movement of anti-apartheid filmmaking. He made drama series for the South African Broadcasting Corporation from the middle 1970s until 1987. The advent of television in South Africa during 1976 gave many local filmmakers artistic opportunities that had not been available due to the ineffective subsidy scheme. Although censorship regarding political material was very tight at the SABC, Van Rensburg could make artistically successful drama series and films. He started with a ten-part comedy series, *Willem*, which was a story of the trials and tribulations of a private detective. This series earned Van Rensburg his first SABC Arts Award for directing.

He decided to move from Johannesburg to Cape Town where he met Johan van Jaarsveld, a writer who became his partner, and under the umbrella of Visio Films, his best television work followed. This relationship with the SABC, however, was cut after Van Rensburg decided to join fifty-two prominent South Africans in 1987 to travel to Dakar, Senegal, in order to have discussions with members of the then banned ANC. The fifty-two South Africans mainly included Afrikaans speaking people, like Van Rensburg's friend, Van Zyl Slabbert, a prominent opposition political figure of the 1980s. The conference in Dakar was a joint undertaking between the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa (Idasa) and the ANC, and discussions about a liberated economy, the form of a liberated government and solutions to South Africa's conflict took place. When Van Rensburg returned to South Africa, he found himself out of work at the SABC. For two years he couldn't work. With the establishment of the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation he hoped to find a sympathetic, progressive group to support him in his work. *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* (1989), a film about a black man's struggle to get his land back due to racist colonial legislation, was his contribution to the new critical, anti-apartheid cinema of the 1980s, and it established him as part of the new movement.

Van Rensburg's short film, *Country Lovers*, also criticised apartheid policy and is based on Nobel prize winner, Nadine Gordimer's work, and forms one of seven short films, collectively titled, *Six Feet of the Country*. To date this series has been seen by over 300 million people world-wide. It has been accepted by the New York Film Forum, and has been screened in Germany, Holland, Belgium, Italy and Channel Four in Britain.

Ironically these films were banned from general release in South Africa and screening was only permitted at the South African film festival, despite the fact that six of the seven films were made by South African casts and crews. *Country Lovers* revolves around a young white Afrikaans boy's affair with a black farm girl he grew up with. As a result of the "immorality" of this situation, Van Rensburg's film was labelled as anti-South African propaganda by the South African censor board. The *New York Times*' critic described the film in a review of 18 May 1983 as "...a delicate and ferocious tale about a love affair of a young Afrikaner and the pretty black girl who grows up with the boy on his father's prosperous farm. The point of the story is the manner in which the innocence of the pair is ultimately destroyed by the Immorality Act. The tale is beautifully acted by Ryno Hattingh and Nomsa Nene as the lovers and is related in such a low key that the full horror of it is not apparent until it is almost over."

Throughout his television and film dramas, director Manie van Rensburg exhibits the same thematic preoccupations, the same recurring motifs and incidents and basically the same visual style. His work explores the psyche of the Afrikaner within an historical as well as a contemporary context. He is preoccupied with communication problems between people, especially within love relationships. The outsider is a dominant figure in his universe. By studying Van Rensburg's *oeuvre* over the past years, one realises that he is probably South Africa's most prominent contemporary auteur director.

Themes that Van Rensburg tends to portray in his chronicles are: the psyche of the Afrikaner in a contemporary or historic situation (especially the period from the 1920s to the 1940s); the way of life of, and motivation for, individuals living on the 'edge' of society; loneliness; and the exploration of the communication potential of film and television to convey contextual and experiential information to the viewer. Within these themes Van Rensburg experiments with particular filmic codes not seen in the work of his contemporaries, Jan Scholtz, Daan Retief, Franz Marx and Elmo de Witt. Van Rensburg's cinema can be divided into three periods; his Afrikaans films of 1971 to 1975, his television work from 1976 to 1987, and from 1988 onwards, his shift towards the international film scene with *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble* (1989), *The Fourth Reich* (1990) and *Taxi to Soweto* (1991).

Van Rensburg's *oeuvre* should be seen as chronicles of the Afrikaner psyche during three significant periods; firstly, the 1930s and the trauma of urbanisation and struggle to retain the land; secondly, the revival of Afrikaner nationalism during South Africa's involvement in the Second World War; and thirdly, the modern, urban Afrikaner of the 1970s and 80s.

The director's cut of *The Fourth Reich* is Van Rensburg's greatest achievement. The film is basically structured as a thriller, a hunt by a dedicated Afrikaner policeman, Jan Taillard (Marius Weyers), working undercover to expose and capture the fascist, Robey Leibbrandt (Ryno Hattingh), before he carries out his plan to assassinate General Smuts. Van Rensburg's themes of betrayal, the outcast, communication problems in relationships (in this case between Taillard and his wife) and Afrikaner nationalism are all present and brilliantly developed in the director's cut which runs for over three hours.

Manie van Rensburg's chronicles of Afrikanerdom are noted for their humane treatment of the characters, including outcasts and the political right wing. These films and television dramas are more than mere profiles of the politics of the time. Most of his work addresses communication problems between people in a universe that is characterised by distrust, paranoia and eventually betrayal. Even comedies such as *Die Square* and *Taxi to Soweto* address the issue of mistrust between humans. Van Rensburg's work as a whole gives a portrait of the strange, complex and divided creature who is the Afrikaner. This portrait is an important alternative to the oversimplified images of Afrikaners as mere racist villains usually depicted in anti-apartheid images of this society.

Van Rensburg placed himself within the Afrikaans lager and, with films such as *Die Square* and *Verspeelde Lente*, managed to upset the establishment. *Die Square* caused a stir by depicting Afrikaners as hypocrites. *Verspeelde Lente* upset Afrikanerdom with its images of poor, lower class Afrikaners. Being Afrikaans was a source of tension, but also creativity in his work. He wasn't interested in portraying Afrikaner history, but in exploring Afrikaners in the larger history of the country. Later, examinations of racism and anti-Semitism became important themes in his work such as *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble*, *Heroes* and especially *The Fourth Reich*. The latter examined the destruction caused by power, racism and anti-Semitism.

If his work has a common theme, it is the conflict between the outsider and communal acceptance, an aspect he experienced in real life. His trip to Dakar during the repressive days of State President P. W. Botha got wide, somewhat hysterical publicity in Afrikaans newspapers, and meant an effective end to his career in the local mainstream film industry and unofficial blacklisting by the SABC.

He divided his career into his pre- and post-Dakar periods. Before Dakar he had work. After Dakar he found himself out of business. He was suddenly a filmmaker in search of a spiritual home; after being a sought-after, popular director, he struggled to make films. And the Left also held pitfalls. I remember an interview with him where he stated his dissatisfaction with FAWO. Someone there phoned him and asked why he hadn't yet submitted his script on *Taxi to Soweto* for approval. His answer was unprintable. He didn't need anyone's seal of approval, from the Right or the Left. He was too honest to take an approved political point of view, and too independent to leave artistic and political judgment to others. At the time of his suicide in 1993, he was only forty-eight years old.

In South Africa Van Rensburg was considered to be a "director with the talent and skill that could eventually put him with the ranks of the world's best" (Tony Jackman in the *Cape Argus* newspaper of 14 March 1983). He received a Honorary Prize from the South African Academy of Science and Art for Cultural achievements in cinema. *The Star* newspaper's *Tonight Award* was given to him four times. The South African Broadcasting Corporation's *Artes Award* was presented to him twice, and he also received awards from the *Afrikaanse Taal en kultuurvereniging*, the M-Net Vita Award for Best Director of *The Fourth Reich*, and the Idem Award for direction of *The Lighthouse (Die Vuurtoring)*. The pay channel M-Net's award for Lifetime Achievement in African cinema is named after Van Rensburg.

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### (3) A LONG HERITAGE OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

The South African film industry is one of the oldest in the world. A long history of documentary filmmaking dates back to 1896. Edgar Hyman filmed scenes of Johannesburg and President Paul Kruger. The first ever newsreels were filmed at the front during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and at the same time fake newsreel footage of battles were shot to create propaganda for Britain's war effort.

New York-born Isidore W. Schlesinger's *African Films* started a tradition of newsreel production in the form of *The African Mirror*, the world's longest-running newsreel (1913-1984). During the next six decades *The African Mirror* captured current affairs in South Africa, but in a rather superficial manner and since 1948 it was used as a propaganda tool to support the dominant culture of apartheid. In 1937 and 1938 a "documentary" was made with a deliberately propagandistic agenda, namely *Die Bou van 'n Nasie (They Built A Nation)*. It attempted to depict the history of the white Afrikaner people and was made to be used as part of the celebration of the centenary of the Great Trek (Afrikaners leaving the Cape Province to settle elsewhere in South Africa) and the Battle of Blood River, a clash between Afrikaners and Zulus in the nineteenth century. The centenary included a re-enactment of the Great Trek, with ox-wagons starting from Cape Town on the 800 mile journey to Pretoria. As was intended the event was a great outpouring of patriotic sentiment, with the political goal to celebrate white Afrikaner nationalism. Another notable documentary of the 1930s was *The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* (1939), which celebrated the mining industry in South Africa. It won a Special Mention Award at the 1939 Venice Film Festival.

Although a state subsidy for fiction feature films has been available between 1956 and 1995 no money was granted to documentary films other than propaganda films made by the National Film Board. Although the South African government of the 1950s consulted John Grierson of Canada's National Film Board regarding the establishment of a national film board for South Africa, his recommendations for experimentation within film to stimulate a truly national cinema and the democratic process, were basically ignored. Ten years after he submitted his report in 1954, the National Film Board (NFB) was established and functioned primarily as a production and distribution facility for the apartheid government's National Party (NP) propaganda. The structure was finally dismantled in 1979. Documentaries such as *Anatomy of Apartheid* (1964) attempted to defend apartheid policy.

It was left to independent filmmakers after 1948 to look at the socio-political realities of South Africa under

apartheid in a critical manner. The reality of South African filmmaking was that in many ways black South Africans were excluded. Black South Africans had no money to make films. They had no access to equipment. Opportunities were almost non-existent for black scriptwriters or directors to create their own images on the screen.

By the end of the 1950s and the first decade of the National Party Government, most of the worst laws of mandatory separation had been passed - regulating education, sexual relationships, work, living space, in fact, virtually every area of human activity, on the base of race. New York independent filmmaker, Lionel Rogosin's *Come Back, Africa* (1959), the first local film to be made covertly, tells the story of a black man, Zacharia, who becomes trapped in the classic South African situation: A migrant worker without skills looking for a job where he has no right to work. The film is a seminal work on the conditions of blacks under apartheid, depicted in a semi-documentary style.

One of the seminal documentaries on the horrors of apartheid is Nana Mahomo's *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (1974). It is an insight into the lives of people living under apartheid during the 1970s. So powerful was the indictment provided by *Last Grave at Dimbaza* that the South African government produced a film during the 1970s to counter its effects, entitled *To Act A Lie* (1978). The South African Embassy in London tried to stop the film being broadcast on the BBC and in the controversy that followed, the BBC allowed the South African government to screen their own film alongside *Last Grave at Dimbaza*. This film led to an international media war over South Africa's image. *Last Grave at Dimbaza* won the Grand Prix at the Melbourne Film Festival. When Mahomo made *Last Grave at Dimbaza* in 1974 he was a member of the Pan African Congress and wanted to use the film medium to educate people about the horrors of apartheid and the conditions in South Africa. His films are characterised by a direct and simple approach to shooting (much of the camera is hand-held and shots are repeated) and are edited with the intention of maximising understanding. Unfortunately Mahomo was forced to live a large part of his life outside South Africa, for example in Botswana. He was one of the few black film directors in South Africa during the 1970s.

Ironically in the same year as Mahomo's anti-apartheid documentary another South African documentary received international praise: The Golden Globe Award for Best Documentary went to Jamie Uys's *Beautiful People*, a celebration of wildlife in the Namib and Kalahari deserts of Southern Africa. Since Uys's international success several South African filmmakers won international acclaim for their work on wildlife, the environment and nature conservation including Neill Curry (*A Stitch in Time*, *African Ark*, *A Fragile Harmony*, *Bring Back the Red-Billed Oxpecker*, *Touchstones*, *Eagles and Farmers*) and Trevor de Kock (*Springbok of the Kalahari*, *City Slickers*).



Figure 1: *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* (Manie van Rensburg, 1989)



Since the late 1970s and the early 1980s a group of film and video producers and directors who were not affiliated to the established film companies in the mainstream film industry, made documentaries about the socio-political realities of the majority of South Africans. Some of these films were shown at local film festivals such as the Durban and Cape Town International Film Festivals, and from 1987 until 1994, the *Weekly Mail* Film Festival. Other venues included universities, church halls, trade union offices and the private homes of interested parties. Most of the films experienced censorship problems during the State of Emergency during the 1980s, and many were banned.

The films had small budgets and were either financed by the directors/producers themselves, by progressive organisations such as the *International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa* (IDAF), which was striving for an united, democratic, non-racial South Africa, and overseas television stations. The documentaries were nearly all made with an international audience in mind in order to get support for the anti-apartheid movement and to educate an international audience on the horrors of apartheid. Notable earlier work included Anthony Thomas's *The South African Experience* (1977), Peter Davis's *White Laager* (1977) and Chris Austin's *Rhythms of Resistance* (1979). In 1980 two major productions on the history of the South African liberation struggle against apartheid were released internationally: Peter Davis's *Generations of Resistance* (1979) and Barry Feinberg's *Isitwalandwe* for IDAF. The latter was the first in a long line of films and videos in the 1980s to keep the conscience of the world alive to the issues at stake in South Africa under apartheid. IDAF was instrumental in establishing an alternative news distribution office in London by providing financial and logistical assistance to anti-apartheid documentary filmmakers.

Some of the most seminal political documentaries of the 1980s came from Video News Services (VNS), which included filmmakers such as Brian Tilley, Laurence Dworkin, Nyana Molete and Tony Bensusan. With the assistance of IDAF one of the first productions by Tilley, Dworkin and Molete was *Forward to a People's Republic* (1982), which depicted the dynamics of the political conflict in South Africa at the time, juxtaposing the black majority's militancy with white militarization. From this group of young filmmakers VNS was formed in April 1985. The unit was founded at a stage when foreign television crews were being established in South Africa and local filmmakers found themselves with no control over what was being filmed and what political analysis was made. These filmmakers saw themselves as political activists engaging with the Apartheid State from the side of the liberation struggle. For VNS to achieve this and avoid being shut down, Afravision was established in London to interface with the international arena and solidarity movements, and in South Africa, VNS crews made themselves indistinguishable from the foreign media operating here. They were thus able to work in the terrain without detection. VNS, through its relationships with the unions, churches, civic and youth structures began distributing "video pamphlets," which serve as a type of news network. They were aimed at South Africans and covered a wide range of current affairs such as vigilante killings, strikes and the white election process.

Apart from VNS other documentary filmmakers have also made important work on political issues during the apartheid regime, including the following themes:

- The forced removal of people from urban and rural communities under the Group Areas Acts and the Homelands policy: *Crossroads* (1976), *Mayfair* (1984), *Last Supper at Horstley Street* (1985) and *Katriver: End of Hope* (1984)
- Labour problems and organisation: *Passing the Message* (1981) and *Freedom Square and Back of the Moon* (1987)
- Different forms of community struggle such as the development of literacy and health projects in rural and urban communities: *Ithuseng* (1987) and *Robben Island: Our university* (1988)
- The role of women in the anti-apartheid struggle: *You Have Struck a Rock* (1981) and *The Ribbon* (1986)
- General political situation: *No Middle Road to Freedom* (1984), *The Struggle from Within* (1983), *Witness to Apartheid* (1986) and *The Two Rivers* (1985)
- The role of the church in the anti-apartheid struggle: *A Cry of Reason* (1987)
- The destruction of indigenous cultures: *The People of the Great Sandface* (1985) and *Have You Seen Drum Recently?* (1986).

Kevin Harris is one of the most significant, as well as prolific documentary and community filmmakers in

South Africa. His work has already received much international praise, as well as several Oscar nominations. Kevin Harris was born in Pietermaritzburg in 1950 and qualified as an electrical engineer in 1973. From 1974 till 1979 he worked at the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Since 1979, because of his political convictions, he practised as an independent documentary filmmaker. Best known internationally for *Witness to Apartheid* (1987) this documentary was shot clandestinely during the State of the Emergency of the 1980s and subsequently banned. It is a dramatic exposure of the extent of apartheid's violence and brutality. The narrative consists of testimonies of victims, as well as eyewitnesses to police repression and torture including children as young as fourteen, who were beaten in detention.

With the unbanning of political organisation such as the African National Congress (ANC) and release of political prisoners in 1990, the immediate direct goal of anti-apartheid films had begun to be achieved. Political filmmakers, however, continued to focus on the process of transition itself, to which a large number of films on CODESA (the negotiation process leading up to the 1994 democratic elections) and on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) attest. One significant film from the time is Liz Fish's *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu*, which follows three political activists after their release from imprisonment on Robben Island. Unprecedented freedom of access also allowed new forms of purely observational filmmaking: Harriet Gavshon and Cliff Bestall's series *Ordinary People* (1993), a groundbreaking product in terms of South African television at the time, followed ordinary South Africans as they dealt with newfound freedom and in the process, documents the transitions in South African society.

Filmmakers were also now finally allowed to probe and reveal what actually happened under apartheid, with the result that many films were now concerned with the past. Various films about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process were made, including Lindi Wilson's *The Guguletu Seven*, which depicts the uncovering by TRC investigators of security police duplicity in the murder of seven Cape Town activists. Many of the older generation of political filmmakers have felt the weight of responsibility for making sense of a hitherto-concealed and painful past. Documentary filmmaking during the 1980s was based on audio-visual material that reflected the realities of the black majority of South Africa in their aspirations and struggle for a democratic society, but since the beginning of the 1990s other marginalised voices were added to these documentaries and short films, for example those of women, gays and lesbians, and even the homeless. Most of these documentaries can be described as progressive film texts in the sense that the majority of them are consciously critical of racism, sexism or oppression. They dealt with the lives and struggle of the people in a developing country and were mostly allied with the liberation movements for a non-racial, non-sexist South Africa.

Some of these documentaries also dealt with events which were conveniently left out in official South African history books or in a contemporary context in actuality programmes on national television under control of the Nationalist regime. Therefore, they became guardians of popular memory within the socio-political process in South Africa. Examples are *Between Joyce and Remembrance* (2003), *The Guguletu Seven* (2000), *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (1998), *Ernest Cole* (1999), *Ulibambe Lingashoni: A comprehensive history of the ANC* (1993), and *What Happened to Mbuyisa?* (1998).

For the first time South African audiences are exposed to certain marginalised communities, such as the homeless in Francois Verster's remarkable documentary *Pavement Aristocrats: The Bergies of Cape Town* (1998), the Himbas of Kaokoland in Craig Matthew's *Ochre and Water* (2001), AIDS victims in *Shouting Silent* (2001), the gay subcultures of the fifties and sixties in *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* (1998), street children in *Hillbrow Kids* (1999), prison inmates in Cliff Bestall's *Cage of Dreams* (2000) and the San in the Foster Brothers' visual poem *The Great Dance* (1999). The latter has already won more than 35 international and national awards, the most for a single film in the history of South African cinema.

Ten years after South Africa has become a democracy the documentary film industry is blossoming. At various international film festivals during 2003 and 2004, including FESPACO, Rotterdam, Berlin, Cannes, Genova, Zanzibar and the Commonwealth Film Festival, retrospectives of South African cinema, including documentaries, were held.

The present is indeed an exciting time for South African features, documentaries and shorts. The South African Government and local government in regions such as Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal and the Western Cape have been quick to realise that the film industry offers this country huge earning potential and the



Figure 2: *U-Carmen e-Khayelitsha* (Mark Dornford-May, 2005)

creation of jobs. The government's national funding institution, the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) has a fund of R250 million per annum earmarked for the film industry within South Africa. The IDC provides financial assistance by means of loans. Parallel with this, the South African Department of Arts and Culture and the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) have made grants to a total of 60 million rand available to filmmakers during the past few years, including documentaries. The IDC, for example, contributed to the budget of Craig and Damon Foster's documentary feature *Cosmic Africa* (2002). Shot on High Definition this visual masterpiece explores and sheds light on traditional African astronomy. Using oral storytelling aesthetics the film vividly captures the remarkable personal journey of African astronomer, Thebe Medupe, through the ancestral land of Namibia's hunter-gatherers, the Dogon country of Mali and the landscapes of the Egyptian Sahara Desert. This seminal work swept eight awards at the 2003 National Television and Video Association's Stone Awards ceremony and received ecstatic acclaim at the Ten Years of Freedom festival in New York in 2004.

Apart from *Cosmic Africa* several outstanding documentaries were made and screened during the 2003/2004. One was impressed by the poetic beauty of *A Fisherman's Tale*, a 26-minute personal narrative documentary film set in Kalkbay, Cape Town. Initially it starts as the story of a young man who takes his father's fishing lines and goes out to sea with the hope of finding what the ocean means to the fishermen. The young man's story is addressed to his mother. But then the film takes another direction and becomes a moving reflection on the despair and hopelessness of these people's lives as globalization takes its effect, leaving entire South African subsistence fishing communities on dry land.

### Training the Filmmakers

The first wave of alternative filmmakers had studied film or theatre overseas. Inspired by this group, many young people (mostly Malay), were eager to be involved in the film industry. At this time, mass communications, broadcasting and a few film courses were already being taught in local colleges and universities. But the setting up of the first film school gave promise of the changes to come. The Malaysian Film Academy started operations in 1989 but it was only the third batch of graduating students in 1997 that began to make some headway in the industry. Some became actors, others cinematographers or writers. Some became directors but could not initiate the desired changes as the old school of film practitioners (who were not formally trained), were too entrenched in their outdated way of doing things. One of these graduates was to be involved in the making of the first DV feature that was to kick-start The Little Cinema.

With animation and multimedia becoming a big thing towards the end of the 1990s, it was full steam ahead for institutions of higher learning to also provide grounding in film and television production. Students



Figure 3: *The Great Dance* (Foster Brothers, 1998)

were subsequently required to make a graduation film for their final year of study and some of these films were submitted to film festivals. A surprising outcome - and one that was to give an impetus to short film production - was when several of the films won international awards. These films were not only well-made technically but also had narratives that played with ideas - an important criteria for short film production.

Students and techno-savvy filmmakers today have many other sources for ideas and inspiration. Surfing the Web for information on filmmaking and filmmakers worldwide is a popular choice. Another (illegal) source is unconventional. Access to the classics of cinema, auteur movies as well as the latest festival films, comes from a steady supply of low cost, pirated VCDs and DVDs. Due to the demand, even the pirates have become knowledgeable about the auteurs of cinema such as Kurosawa, Verhoeven, Fellini and Bergman (one DV filmmaker remarked that the video pirates were even willing to fund alternative filmmakers)! The bonus material found in DVDs is a useful source of reference to understand production methods and approaches.

Structurally it is amazing to note how the personal narrative about the author's inability to communicate with his Dad, and the emotions that he could never articulate to his mother, is seamlessly integrated with the harsh conditions of the fishing community. With funding from the NFVF director Riaan Hendricks has realised this project after three hard years. Like in the case of the Foster Brothers (*Cosmic Africa*, *The Great Dance*) Hendricks's documentary is enough proof that documentary work could be personal and poetic, and still succeed as non-fiction.

And documentaries in the post-apartheid South Africa has indeed moved away from the stark political texts of the 1980s to become more personal. Screened all over the world, *Project 10*, a series of documentaries which examine the personal experiences of ten years of democracy in South Africa, became a landmark in local documentary filmmaking. *Project 10* was developed and commissioned by the public broadcaster SABC1 and supported by the NFVF, the Maurits Binger Institute and the Sundance Institute.

A major contributor to the stimulation of documentary filmmaking in South Africa has been Encounters, the annual international documentary film festival in South Africa, which includes workshops on documentary production. Several universities and film schools such as CityVarsity Film, Television and Multimedia School also offer comprehensive courses on documentary filmmaking.



Figure 4: *Cosmic Africa* (Damon Foster, 2002)

## Notes

1. See publications by Blignaut & Botha (1992), Gutsche (1972) and Tomaselli (1989).
2. People who live on another's farm under certain conditions of services.

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